

LIVES MATTER

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

By

Donald R Sawyer Jr.

Director: Mr. Ron Laboray
Professor of Painting and Drawing

Committee: Dr. Erin Tapley, Director, School of Art and Design; Professor, Art Education
Mr. Tom Ashcraft, Endowed Professor of Visual Arts, MFA Director
Dr. Seth McCormick, Assistant Professor, Art History

September 2017

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To God, my loving wife Latonya, and my sons Donald III and Dominique; for their constant support and encouragement. I appreciate the unconditional life-long faith in my abilities to succeed and for enabling this accomplishment to happen. I love you all.

To Wayne, Darren, Kevan, and Pame, my incredible siblings, mentors, and friends in all things. I am so grateful for all the extra support you have given me. I cannot speak enough to express my gratitude toward all you have done.

To Tammy Evans, M.F.A., Chair, Associate Professor of Graphic Design, Art and Visual Studies at Winston- Salem State University; without your knowledge, guidance, and support, none of my success would be possible.

To Claudette Weston, Weston and Associates, for being there through it all; thanks for believing in me.

In loving Memory of Mildred Peppers, History Professor, Winton- Salem Forsyth County Schools, for her continuous support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	iv
Abstract	v
Lives Matter.....	1
Conclusion	9
Works Cited	11
Appendix: List of Images	12

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure A1. "R.I.P Trayvon" 2015, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"	13
Figure A2. "Live's Matters" 2016, oil on canvas, 36"x 79"	14
Figure A3. "Blue Black Innocent" 2015, oil on canvas, 38"x 50"	15
Figure A4. "D.O.A." 2017, oil on canvas, 24"x 30"	16
Figure A5. "Poppy Got You" 2017, oil on canvas, 36"x 48"	17
Figure A6. "Girl Talk" 2017, oil on canvas, 36"x 48"	18
Figure A7. "Red Carpet" 2017, oil on canvas, 41"x 54"	19
Figure A8. "Girl Power" 2017, oil on canvas, 36"x 48"	20
Figure A9. "Homeless" 2015, oil on canvas, 30"x 48"	21
Figure A10. "Homeless-nest" 2017, oil on canvas, 70"x 100"	22

ABSTRACT

Lives Matter

Donald R Sawyer Jr.

Western Carolina University (September 2017)

Director: Mr. Ron Laboray

My studio practice investigates “Blackness” -- a term that provides both a positive and negative identity. “Blackness” is a reflection not only of the black community, but also of the entire world. My studio research includes crime statistics, information and interviews from the African American community, various media outlets, and narrative subject matter derived from personal experiences. My paintings actively reveal a black community asking questions about their identity, power, and traditions, while also trying to place into context those daily struggles and celebrations of life. Therefore, my practice seeks to challenge the black community to empower themselves through presenting personal histories and engaging in activism such as the “Black Lives Matter” movement. My work is also to challenge others to contemplate, why there is a positive and negative connotation with “Blackness”? Because all lives do matter. I base my paintings around three worldly themes that greatly concern me, as a black artist. These realistic, narrative compositions are my views of police violence and its consequences, human trafficking, and homelessness, within the black communities and the world as a whole.

LIVES MATTER

I have discovered an immeasurable difference in blackness, which provides both a positive and negative connotation throughout the African American art community. I am no longer acting as a representational painter. Instead, I am focusing on history and personal memory. I have been working in a manner where I rely on an African American community, media outlets, and personal experiences, creating genre of paintings I can call my own. I attempt to work intuitively, to follow my instinct.

Through the manipulation of realistic, narrative compositions based on my views of police violence, human trafficking, and homelessness, I seek to bring to the attention of an African American community and the entire country, the need to address these issues more critically through painting. I am constructing compositions by incorporating actual events, news media, and the black communities' response to society. My works search for positive solutions to ongoing problems in America by stimulating conversation. I am allowing these new paintings to express the hurt, confusion and sorrow I've felt when I read about these events occurring. The only way I know how to work through pain, is to paint through these feelings. This method of connecting emotionally to the subject has drastically shifted my painting style to a more loose and free painting pattern using oils much like Henry Taylor, a present Los Angeles based painter.

In his portraits, Henry Taylor paints loosely and quickly. He represents relatives, friends, athletes, and celebrities at various scales as subject matter that he loves and has sympathy for. Taylor also draws on folk art and modernism that traces back to African American paintings by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Beardon. Just like Taylor, I too love to paint those subjects that "I

love and have sympathy for”. (Henry Taylor) Looking back, I have always had the desire to paint loosely and freely. Not holding myself so accountable to perfect details, trying to employ a gestural technique. I’ve chosen a more aggressive, spontaneous, and urgent brushstrokes approach. I’ve addressed black identity, black power, Black culture, and black history, with freedom and control!

As a child, the first art I was introduced to was the silhouette. My teacher introduced the silhouette to the class and I found it very difficult to wait my turn. I was thirsty to get my hands on something new. Nonetheless, over my years of growth, I have found the silhouette has been used in a positive and negative manner. African American artist Kara Walkers’ compositions of the silhouette have been viewed upon as positive, negative, and disturbing. Walker is known for her wall-sized cut paper silhouettes, horrifying content, and nightmarish illustrations of the history of the American South. Her style intrigued me as an artist. She left me desiring to incorporate the silhouette in the compositions I create. Walker, a historical painter, revived the grandeur of European history painting, creating scenes based on history, literature, and the Bible, making it relevant and new in the contemporary art world. The silhouette is essential to the meaning of her work. Walkers’ images are really about racism in the present and the inequalities that persist in dividing America. While, the compositions Walker creates draw heavily on traditions and storytelling, she also merges fact, fiction, and imagination to complete the compositions. “I don’t want to do what’s expected of me as a black artist”. (Kara Walker)

I enjoy utilizing the silhouette. This is an intricate element of my process, for I have the need to carry on with tradition that influenced me as an artist. However, a silhouette is an image of an animal, object or in my case a person or object represented as a solid shape of a color,

preferably black, with its edges gesturing the outline of the figure, object, and subject matter. The silhouette is usually presented on a light background typically white. While a silhouette appears as a solid shape, the image may be created in various artistic media. Silhouettes were first pieces of cut paper, utilized as backing for color and then framed. They represented a cheap but effective means to create art. This use of silhouettes became popular in the mid -18th century and continued to be used until the early decades of the 19th century. The tradition has continued under this name, (Silhouette) into the 21st century with very little manipulation or change. It is derived from the name of Etienne de Silhouette, a French minister. His name became known for anything made cheaply. Many an artist has incorporated the silhouette in their art, media, and illustrations. Author, Hans Christian Anderson, modern artist Robert Ryan, Wilhelm Gross, Henri Riviere, and film maker John Alton, are among these.

More recent artists have incorporated the silhouette. Kerry James Marshall, with his unique style of mastering the silhouette form with color, values and realism. His works speak of injustice, grief, and loss, with a positive view of everyday life, rituals, and quiet moments. He moves the viewer into a world often forgotten about in fine art. Marshall paints personal experiences, reflections, and less negative stereotypical images of black men and women, instead of ones of criminality. Marshall's work references both art and African American art history. For decades, Marshall has been involved with painting in the grand art historical tradition addressing the historiography of black art. Always exploring new techniques and subject matter, Marshall has placed himself in the pantheon of a master draftsman and painter. He is an artist with the ability to show the viewer different ways of seeing by addressing the

limitations and contradictions of subjects in dominant white art historical narrative. He does not surrender his desire to create paintings using black figures.

Kerry James Marshall states, “I’m acutely aware of and obsessively invested in how the narrative of art history is structured, and the burden that history imposes on artists ambitious enough to dream of being part of it. Black artists have not really been significant players in the narrative for very long. It’s only in the mid-twentieth century that you start seeing black people making artworks that were thought important enough to talk about in relationship to that history. So, the challenge is to gain an uncontested place in the pantheon of art history without surrendering the desire to make pictures with black figures”. (Kerry James Marshall)

The challenges to being considered a narrative art historian has become an obsession for me, in that the desire to create, produce, and continue with narrative based compositions can be overwhelming in spite of society’s love of abstraction. The constant chain of events such as police violence, human trafficking, and homelessness in the United States, are issues that push me to create works that stimulate conversation. I constantly rely on actual events, news media, and personal experiences to document narrative based compositions in my artistic practice. It is my strongest desire to be recognized as a black artist in the pantheon of art history.

My life experience and the urge to paint, gives me determination to create compositions that reflect 20th century art history. I look backwards at a very abusive childhood, the Civil Rights Movement, Segregation, Desegregation and the Black Panthers Movement. I thought I had seen the last of police violence and corruption in the sixties. I am also the survivor of three years of child molestation, along with an adult forced childhood dependence on heroin, and life long history of observing homelessness. It seems that in this year 2017, the world is more

chaotic than it was in 1965 when Martin Luther King Jr. began his quest to make the world a better place to live. At age fifty-five I never thought I would be forced to relive some of the same horrific events from the sixties. Police violence is at an all-time high. The United States has the highest homeless rates and human trafficking has become commonplace. Having experienced all these events personally, there is a need, desire, and obsession to record, paint, and critically view these problems. My sole purpose is to compose historical narratives that grab and tug the attention of the viewers.

This process I am pursuing as discussed by Walker and Marshall has radically altered my style. I start working with my eyes; observing everyday events. Secondly, I retain experiences and encounters with people, places and objects in my mind to conceive an idea. It is very common for me to stop people and ask for photo sessions, or halt the automobile to snap a picture of that certain place in my mind. Once the creation is conceived and drawn onto the canvas, I apply a fat over lean technique wash of color. I can have no canvas showing. It is a distraction and must be covered quickly. This process begins by choosing the materials that will reflect an ethereal quality. I am currently using various scales of canvas which help me find the range of scale pursuant to my interest. I no longer paint on a small scale and have become attuned to a 70"x 100" proportion. I apply thin layers of oil paint in many directions, allowing the paint to automatically flow in different paths on the surface of the canvas. As I continue to layer, the meatiness of the material and the physicality of the texture begin to intrigue me, forcing me to continue to push the paint into the canvas with more aggressive and loose brush strokes. This looseness leaves more visible marks, and I strive to continue to layer the oil paint, as artist Henry Taylor would.

Instead of simply incorporating the silhouette, it is my intention to introduce the silhouette, so that the viewer has to ask the question why? The silhouette may take on a positive and negative connotation in the same painting. It is meant to make the viewer ponder on the question without being disturbing. Art that disturbs people usually is not viewed for very long, but, this art is meant to disturb. I want one to look, walk away and come back to look again and again. The silhouettes used have many points of entry which allows for diverse visual experiences. These paintings become figurative and narrative, morphing continuously into both something and nothing. I want to coax the images into forming themselves. I find the figurative artwork I have seen are now merging with the artwork I create. It becomes difficult for me to determine where the separation lies. Figurative art ideas coalesce in my mind and come out onto the canvas. I enjoy discovering places in my compositions that remind me of the conversations I have in my mind when I view other painter's visions. It is imperative for onlookers to make that same connection with my compositions. If it does not stimulate that sense of familiarity, then I have not succeeded in my goals. "I don't want to do what's expected of me as a black artist" (Kara Walker). However, I believe I want to proceed as a purposeful black scholar and painter. To paint compositions that address issues of present day events, particularly those that showcase police violence against minorities. Going back to the Rodney King case where a tape was released of him being beaten on March 3, 1991, by Los Angeles police Department officers following a high-speed car chase, to the Trayvon Martin murder on February 26, 2012 where a 17-year-old African-American from Miami Gardens, Florida, was fatally shot in Sanford Florida by George Zimmerman a neighborhood watch volunteer (Figure A1).

In 1960, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged black America and white America to come together in unity. Here we are fifty years later and African-American males are being killed at a higher rate than Caucasian males by police officers. Hence, the “Black Lives Matter” movement arose. Since 2010 to the present, according to “ProPublica” analysis of federally collected data on fatal police shooting, “1,217 deadly police shootings from 2010 to 2012 captured in the federal data show that blacks, ages 15 to 19, were killed at a rate of 31.17 per million, while just 1.41 per million white males in that age range died at the hands of police (Figure A2).

“ProPublica” found that young black men are 21 times as likely as their white peers to be killed by police. It should not matter if we are blue, black, or white we should be treated as human beings and not gunned down as a deer in head lights (Figure A3). In the year 2016, police officers have taken it upon themselves to shoot African-American men at the scene of an infraction. We are not even making it to the booking room at the police station. Dead on Arrival (Figure A4). Ironically perhaps, the 1960 Civil Rights Movement fought and won victories by declaring the moral obligation of fair and equal treatment under the law. Equality and justice frame the possibility of freedom, and greater freedom becomes attainable only when people are united and believe, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” African Americans have come together to protest unjustified treatment by the criminal justice system and government. Not surprisingly, African Americans have been met with resistance at every turn. Unfortunately, it seems as though the outcry of African Americans to stand up and speak out and say, “Black Lives Matter,” is not the proper way to voice disappointment because we are met with the fact that “All Lives Matter.”

Lives matter because, human trafficking in America has become an epidemic. “Victims of child trafficking can be used and abused time and time again. A 32 billion-a-year industry, human trafficking is on the rise and is in all 50 states (U.S. Government). 4.5 Million of trafficked victims are sexually exploited. We as a nation, because lives matter, have to view this issue more critically (Figure A5) and protect our little ones (Figure A6). In 2002 and 2004, three young girls were kidnapped separately in their tight-knit community and were held hostage for ten years. The abductor was acquainted with the young girls through his daughter, which made abduction much easier. On May 6, 2013, the now young ladies were rescued (Figure A7). How much more can we do as a nation? Thanks to Amber Alerts more victims are being rescued (Figure A8). It’s been proven that, hanging out with a group lessens the chances of being abducted. And finally, playgrounds (which are the number one hunting grounds for predators), must be better safeguarded.

Lives of homeless people should also matter. The U.S. boasts its greatness. Many literally die to get here. We have and waste more food than some see in a lifetime. America should be able to take care of our citizens, and not depend solely on our American, African American, and other minority churches to do it all, right? Yet, “On any given night in the United States, more than half a million people experience homelessness, with a high percentage of them being Veterans. While families, children and youth are all affected, most of the individuals who experience homelessness are single adults, with an unusually high percentage of females (Figure A9). Veterans, domestic abuse victims, the mentally impaired, poor, lower income persons, and substance abusers have higher rates of homelessness also. But according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, (Figure A10) a disproportionate number of minorities

experience homelessness at 60 percent and alarmingly 40 percent are African American according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The causes are broad, systemic, include discrimination in employment, housing, and the criminal justice system, (primarily individuals with felonies). Furthermore, homelessness is a global issue as well, spanning as far as Africa, Australia, Cambodia, India, Israel, Japan, Europe, Mexico, and Russia. According to, Global Homelessness Statistics (GHS).

Conclusion

This body of work offers a visual of investigation, experience, and reflection of my blackness and what it means to live in our not-so-perfect society. History is being made and recorded every day. With a concentration on “Lives Matter,” these compositions are of course, open to interpretation, which draw the viewer into the beauty of the paintings and the manner of my process. They are allowed to find their own connection to each painting, which can enhance certain qualities that are present. These qualities are real and may either be looked upon as disturbing by some and reassuring by others. The “How-does-it-make-you-feel?” intent of each work occurs as a narrative, so the individual finds themselves reading, addressing, and being delighted by them or being rebuked by them.

Many viewers have seen my paintings at this point and think they are complete. But, I do not want one to look once and walk away. The narrative calls for you to return. They must ask the question, ‘Why?’ The images I create may change over the years, for there is no limit to what one can do with the silhouette and there is no telling what the next day will bring in our society. I enjoy the push and pull nature of the media and its layering. The finale is the rough meatiness of the oil paintings physicality due to the many layers used. In spite of oil paints parameters, I allow myself spontaneity, aggression, and fluidity. My subject matters are my passionate attention: while continuing to address such issues as lives matter, homelessness, human trafficking, and police brutality. Creative expression isn’t always comfortable to observe, because it represents our individual and societal flaws. “If art is to nourish the root of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him” (John F. Kennedy).

WORKS CITED

- "Henry Taylor." *Artsy*, <https://artsy.net/artist/henry-taylor>. 14 September 2017.
- "Kara Walker." *The Art Story*, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-walker-kara.htm>. 1 August 2017.
- Marshall, Kerry James. *Look See*. David Zwirner Books, 2015
- "Police Brutality and misconduct." *Has Martin Luther King's Dream Come True, Today?*
<http://mylesadamsmilk2010.weebly.com/police-brutality-and-misconduct.html>. 22 August 2017.
- "Silhouette" *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silhouette>. 20 September 2017.
- Galton, Jeremy. *The Encyclopedia of Oil Painting Techniques*. Running Press Book, 1991
- "Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Fact" *CNN Library*,
<http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast/index.html>. 22 June 2017.
- "Human Trafficking" *United States Department of Justice*,
<http://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking>. 19 August 2017
- "Homelessness in America" *Alliance to End Homelessness National*,
<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/>. 5 May 2017
- "Deadly Force, in Black and White" *ProPublica*, <https://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white>. 8 September 2017
- "A Global issue: Human Trafficking Statistic" *UNICEF USA*
<https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/infographic-global-human-trafficking-statistics>. 10 July 2017

APPENDIX

Thesis Exhibition Images

13. "Police Violence" "R.I.P. Trayvon" 2015, Oil on canvas, 24"x 30".
14. "Police Violence" "Live's Matter" 2015, Oil on canvas, 36"x 79".
15. "Police Violence" "Blue Black Innocent" 2015, Oil on canvas, 38"x 50".
16. "Police Violence" "D.O.A." 2017, Oil on canvas, 24"x 30".
17. "Human Trafficking" "Poppy Got you" 2017, Oil on canvas, 36"x 48".
18. "Human Trafficking" "Girl Talk" 2017, Oil on canvas 36"x 48".
19. "Human Trafficking" "Red Carpet" 2017, Oil on canvas, 41"x 54".
20. "Human Trafficking" "Girl Talk" 2017, Oil on canvas, 36'x 48".
21. "Homelessness" "Homeless" 2015, Oil on canvas, 30"x 48".
22. "Homelessness" "Homeless-nest" 2017, Oil on canvas, 70"x 100".



"Police Violence" "R.I.P. Trayvon" 2015, Oil on canvas, 24"x 30", Donald Sawyer.



"Police Violence" "Live's Matter" 2015, Oil on canvas, 36"x 79", Donald Sawyer.



"Police Violence" "Blue Black Innocent" 2015, Oil on canvas, 38"x 50", Donald Sawyer.



"Police Violence" "D.O.A." 2017, Oil on canvas, 24"x 30", Donald Sawyer.



"Human Trafficking" "Poppy Got you" 2017, Oil on canvas, 36"x 48", Donald Sawyer.



"Human Trafficking" "Girl Talk" 2017, Oil on canvas 36"x 48", Donald Sawyer.



"Human Trafficking" "Red Carpet" 2017, Oil on canvas, 41"x 54", Donald Sawyer.



"Human Trafficking" "Girl Talk" 2017, Oil on canvas, 36'x 48", Donald Sawyer.



"Homelessness" "Homeless" 2015, Oil on canvas, 30"x 48", Donald Sawyer.



"Homelessness" "Homeless-nest" 2017, Oil on canvas, 70"x 100", Donald Sawyer.